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Practical and theoretical challenges in doing cross-national research within the LGBT context: The problem of language

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It has been acknowledged that, generally, contexts are central to the meaning of identities (Smith 1991) and that, more specifically, *sexual* identities are constructed differently in different local *national* contexts (Binnie 1997). Koopmans and others argue that when public discourses produce accounts of contemporary social issues, they draw on reservoirs of meaning constituted by national cultures and histories, which provide specific ways of framing the above accounts (Koopmans, Statham, Giugni and Passy 2005). Is there a way, then - considering the aforementioned specificities - to compare these accounts *cross-nationally* so that the comparison makes sense and is empirically and epistemologically sound? Even if we recognise the differences in how LGBT individuals have been positioned in the UK and in Poland (differences deriving from national histories, histories of the LGBT movements, socio-political dynamics and - most importantly - language), problems remain on the pragmatic as well as the epistemological level, questioning the possibility of drawing useful comparative conclusions from our research. In this short discussion I would like to pay attention to some challenges and difficulties I have encountered doing my own comparative research on Polish and British gay men. I want to argue that these and similar issues may require consideration in other empirical studies focusing on LGBT individuals or communities which adopt a comparative approach and which are performed cross-nationally. I hope that this argument will raise questions that need to be considered by researchers and theorists who investigate national and sexual identities inter-culturally, with particular regard to the Anglo-Polish context.

The study, which I am currently conducting as part of my MA thesis, explores attitudes of *young single gay men* (YSGM) towards their future relational living. In this project I analyse male same-sex relationships as an abstract concept by examining how single gay men who have recently become adult conceptualise their prospective intimacies. The idea of making this research a comparative study between British and Polish YSGM emerged primarily from my interest in laws regulating intimate life, notably

legal recognition of relationships and adoption. I found it fascinating to explore the potential role of such legislation in early-adult formations of ideas, and ideals, of relationships and family life. Contrasting a country in which gay men have been enabled to benefit from the above laws with a country in which these laws remain inaccessible to homosexual individuals seemed to provide a good way of examining the level to which the presence, or absence, of the "legal possibilities", traditionally seen as fundamental for the social structuring of family, matters at this early stage of gay men's adult lives - a stage at which the aforementioned possibilities can only be considered in terms of the future. My own position as a Pole who lives in the UK, providing familiarity as well as a certain level of identification with both groups in my study, encouraged me to explore the comparison between Polish and British YSGM not only in relation to the existing legal situations, but also with regard to the particular social, historical and political contexts. I became committed to the idea that comparative research can teach us more about our own country than can be learnt from national studies as it exposes the country's uniqueness and pinpoints the aspects in which our country is similar to others (Jowell and Park 2008). As a researcher personally related to both Poland and Britain, I also felt I possessed potentially "good tools" for interpretative attempts and comparative theorising in approaching the socio-cultural phenomenon I was interested in. However, even though I had some awareness of the practical and intellectual challenge my project was likely to pose due to the fact it compared individuals living in different realities and speaking different languages; I was not appreciative enough of the number of levels on which its challenging nature would manifest itself. It turned out that problems emerged long before the analysis of data - a process I have expected to cause the biggest difficulties. Forming a sample of participants, collecting data and conceptualising the mere idea of the comparison also posed important questions, many of which had not been anticipated.

I would like, however, to pay particular attention to the problems posed by language as I believe it is the most challenging aspect of doing cross-national research. Research in the LGBT context seems particularly "sensitive" in this respect due to the relatively short history of the public discourses relating to homosexuality in its "modern sense" (in one that signifies, above all, personal identity) and the unequal timings of local developments of these discourses, with the inevitable processes of languages "borrowing" from one another. Considering that the most influential LGBT movements have been the Anglo-American ones; non-heterosexual identities, and everything related to them, had usually been expressed in the English language before attempts were made to describe "equivalent" phenomena in other languages. Polish LGBT

discourses are no exception here and it is evident that whenever they are used - whether in academia or in everyday language - there is a feeling of constant negotiation of the extent to which particular terms or expressions from the English LGBT discourse should be accommodated in the Polish one. Often, literal translations of these words and phrases continue to be used but they change their original English meanings when confronted with local socio-cultural dynamics. A good example is the distinction between "gay man" and "homosexual man". While in English "gay" is often preferred, with many arguing that "homosexual" has negative, medical connotations; the reverse seems to be the case in Polish: it is "gay man" (*gej*), particularly when used in the plural form (*geje*), that may often sound derisive, whereas "homosexual (man)" (*homoseksualista* or *mężczyzna homoseksualny*) appears to be a more neutral label. Of course, in both languages, the two terms are constantly contested; nevertheless, the above tendency seems to prevail. Therefore the question comparative researchers and theorists need to ask themselves is how to adequately apply both terms when writing *about* gay/homosexual men in a different language from the one in which data had been collected - and when writing *for* the readers whose language is not the one research participants used. Also, shall Polish LGBT authors encourage the usage of the term *gej* to make people's reactions to it more positive, or would it be an inappropriate attempt of an unnecessary alteration of the Polish LGBT discourse, where the taken-for-granted superiority and greater effectiveness of the mainstream English LGBT discourse would be assumed one more time?

Another linguistic issue that emerged in my research were disparate reactions of Polish and British gay men to two terms referring to same-sex relationships: "legalising" and "formalising". I used these terms in different questions in a questionnaire designed for my study, aiming to put an emphasis on particular aspects or consequences of same-sex relationship recognition. I assumed that thanks to the straightforward translations of these words from one language to another (English "legalise" = Polish *legalizować* ; English "formalise" = Polish *formalizować*), the English and Polish versions of the questions were likely to be interpreted in the same way. However, potential Polish respondents, who provided feedback on the questionnaire, found the term *formalizować* rather awkward or inappropriate. They often suggested replacing the term with *legalizować,* which I did, changing the English "formalise" to "legalise" analogously, even though I felt that by doing this my English questions were losing their earlier potential to explore exactly what was of interest to me. My concern was reflected in a comment made by one of my British respondents who said he felt ambivalent about the term "legalise" as it assumed that if he lived with a partner without a civil partnership, he would do it as something

illegal.

In fact, the term "legalising" appears to be more common than "formalising" in both Polish and English. However, googling "relationship legalization" produces only twice as many results as googling "relationship formalization", whereas the search for *legalizacja związku* ("relationship legalization") offers 10 times more results than *formalizacja związku* ("relationship formalization"). This substantial difference certainly tells us something meaningful about the specificities of Polish and British "intimate discourses", and consequently, of the ways in which gay men in the two countries conceptualise their relational living. The question is, however, how cautious we should be in using terms such as the ones mentioned above when communicating with research participants and when writing about the experiences and meanings those participants have shared with us in another language: describing Polish non-heterosexuals in English and telling stories of the British ones in Polish.

The above examples illustrate how much more complicated LGBT research becomes when we conduct it from a cross-national comparative perspective. I have tried to highlight that the complexities inherent in such comparative attempts affect the whole research process and not just data analysis, as it may sometimes seem. In my attempt to do this, I would like to encourage a discussion of other issues that may require critical consideration when sexual politics and LGBT people are researched and theorised in the comparative Anglo-Polish context.

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